

# The People of Baltistan

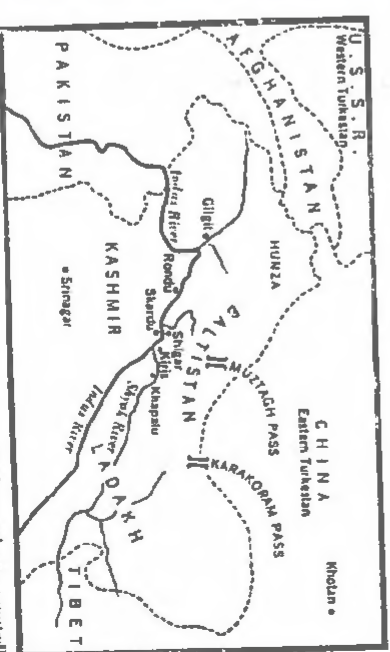
A transitional culture of Central Asia

By JAMES HURLEY

HIGH ASIA WAS INTRODUCED to much of the world only seventy years ago in a book by E. E. Knight called *Where Three Empires Meet*. Although one of these "Three Empires"—that of the British—has now passed away, recent moves in High Asia by the Chinese have revived interest in the area. Yet knowledge of this remote region has remained remarkably unchanged since the latter nineteenth century. Knight's work, which became almost a textbook for more than a generation of British school children, was mainly concerned with Hunza, a tiny mountain principality that was situated almost at the meeting place of British India, Russia, and China. But Knight also touched briefly on Baltistan, or Little Tibet, a fascinating and still relatively unknown region lying off the main routes and passes, then, as now, out of the main political arena of the contending powers.

Who are the Balti and why is their country sometimes called Little Tibet?

Briefly, the Balti are of mixed Mongoloid and Caucasoid racial stock; they speak a language of the Tibeto-Burman family, and they are followers of the prophet Muhammad. This unusual combination of race, language, and religion probably exists nowhere else in the entire Himalayan and trans-Himalayan region. In fact, Baltistan is one of the important transition areas between East and West: it marks the farthest westward extension of the Tibetan language and culture, and quite justly the farthest eastward penetration by the Caucasoid into one of the most formidable mountain landscapes on the world's surface. One can well imagine how painfully slow must have been their progress if one looks at a relief map that shows the successive complex of the Hindu Kush, Pamir, and Karakoram ranges, which thrust immense ice-capped ramparts, high plateaus, and deep gorges in the way of any intruders into the region.

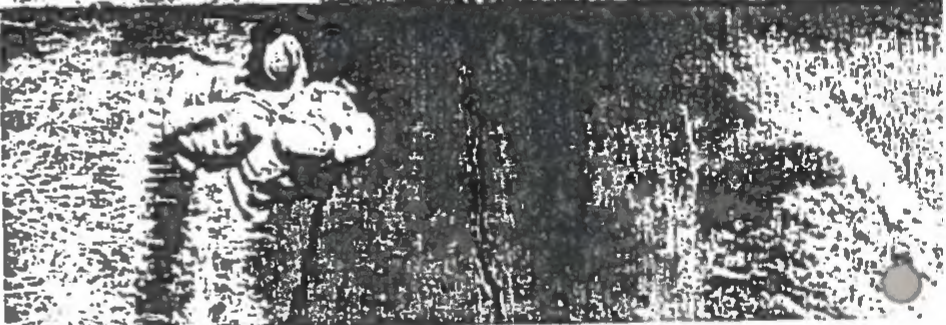


Map of the region of Baltistan, showing its location relative to Pakistan, Afghanistan, China, and Tibet. The map highlights the Indus River, Gilgit River, and Shyok River, as well as the Karakoram Pass and Sulaiman Pass. The text notes that Baltistan is a transitional culture of Central Asia, and that the region is sometimes called Little Tibet.





HEAVY LAINS PARTS CLIMB UP STEEP SOUTHERN SLOPE OF THE 16,600-FOOT SKORO



IN, ONE OF THE MANY PASSES SEPARATING THE INHABITED VALLEYS FROM ONE ANOTHER.

sources of knowledge—not only for remote places such as Balistan, but also for many areas in India as well. Journeying from northwestern India to Balistan in about A.D. 682, Hsuan Tsang recorded . . . after climbing precipices and crossing valleys, we go up the course of the Shata (Indus) River; and then, by the help of flying bridges and footways made of wood across the chasms and precipices . . . we arrive at the country of Fataho (Bodor or Balistan). It stands in the midst of the great Snowy Mountains. It produces wheat and pulse, gold and silver. Thanks to the quantity of gold, the country is rich in supplies . . . the people are rough and rude in character; and as for politeness, such

a thing has not been heard of. They are coarse and despicable in appearance . . . their letters are nearly like those of India, their language somewhat different. There are about a hundred *sangharanas* (monasteries) in the country, with something like a thousand priests, who show no great zeal for learning and are careless in their moral conduct."

Not a very complimentary passage, but it does provide us with facts on which we can almost surely rely. Although historical circumstances have changed greatly over the last 1,300 years, much of what Hsian Tsang said is still appropriate. For example, the difficulties of the route along the deep Indus gorge between Gilgit and

Skardu are virtually the same. Hsian Tsang's comment on the language is especially interesting in that it may refer to the Tibetan script (which was adopted from the Indian) and thereby indicate that Balistan had already been subject to Tibetan influence for a considerable period. Whatever script was used—and we know almost nothing of what it was—it has long since been discarded (probably about the time of the Moslem conversions), being considered a relic of idolatry.

Balistan enters the picture again, briefly but dramatically, in the eleventh century annals of the Tang Dynasty. During the sixth and seventh centuries, China had been extending its sway over the western region—Turk-

Kashgar, Khotan, Kucha, and Kara-shar. Between A.D. 606 and 741, the Balis, fearing attack from the Tibetans, sent several missions to the Chinese court. One of the results was the conclusion of a marriage alliance—always important in the East—between a Balis prince and a Tang princess. The Tang rulers also sent 4,000 Chinese soldiers in A.D. 722 to assist the Balis in repelling the Tibetan invaders. But all was far from settled. The Tibetans overran Balistan in 737. Ten years later, in 747, the area changed hands again when a Chinese force re-established Tang influence.

The year 747 was an important one in Central Asia, for that August a force of 10,000 Chinese, under the Korean general Kao Hsien-shih, crossed the formidable barrier of the Pamir and Hindu Kush to the west and wiped out the Tibetan garrison at Gilgit. The political importance of this event was great, for it came at a critical time in history and forestalled a tie-up between the Tibetans and the rapidly advancing Arabs on the west, who were already in western Turkestan. It is difficult to imagine how the face of Asia might look now had there been a joint Arab-Tibetan invasion of China. The Chinese march into Gilgit is equally remarkable as a feat of logistics. It marks the only time a major military force has crossed this continental divide between China and India, and it has been held to compare with, or even surpass, the great Alpine feats of such commanders as Hannibal and Napoleon.

However, the Chinese victory was only temporary: within a few years they were thrown out of Turkestan, not to return for more than a thousand years. In A.D. 751, Balistan was permanently overpowered by the Tibetans. Thereafter, there are no references to the area in Chinese annals. In fact, for the next six centuries Balistan is almost a complete blank. We know nothing of how long the Tibetans stayed, what the nature of their rule was, or what cultural interpenetration took place. It has been surmised that the Tibetan occupation was relatively short and that the surviving exertion was nominal. This seems a reasonable premise in view of the great distance—more than 2,000 miles—separating Balistan from Tibet's center, Lhasa. Of even more historical relevance is the fact that, by

the end of the ninth century, Tibet's power—and with it that mountain nation's one serious bid to be a world power—had passed. But even during this brief period, we may assume that much of the racial admixture we see now in Balistan had taken place.

The blank of the next few centuries is not even penetrated by Marco Polo. That notable medieval traveler and observer, when he passed several hundred miles to the north in the thirteenth century on his way to the court of Kublai Khan, made only the briefest reference to the mountainous area of Bodor lying to the south. He gave no geographic details of this region, but earlier students of his travels thought Balistan might fall within it. The modern view, however, is that Polo meant only the country lying between the great bend of the Indus (at Gilgit) and the Pamirs.

Not until the end of the fifteenth century do we begin to get some sort of sketchy idea of the Balis in their present historical setting. It was then that the new Moslem rulers of Kashmir began to take an interest in their mountain neighbor to the northeast. The Hindu kings who had ruled Kashmir up to the middle of the fourteenth century may have exercised loose control over the Balis from time to time, but on the whole, Balistan had probably retained its independence. Now the Moslem sultans looked at it possibly with an eye to fixing up with eastern Turkestan, where the population had embraced Islam some time during or soon after the wars, in the ninth century, of Tibet's monarchy.

For unknown centuries before this Moslem influx, the Balis had been Buddhists. We know this mainly from carvings and graffiti on rocks—showing such typically Buddhist subjects as juncos, monuments and bodhisattvas—which are still visible at several places in Balistan (the large one near Skardu, shown on pages 22-23, is considered the finest example). We have no direct evidence as to when the Balis became Buddhists, but it appears to have happened sometime between the fourth and seventh centuries. Hsian Tsang's reference to the priests and monasteries, already quoted, is the only positive clue. But these rock carvings also tell us something else: they indicate the existence of an early, pagan religion. Among the crude figures carved on the rocks, now little



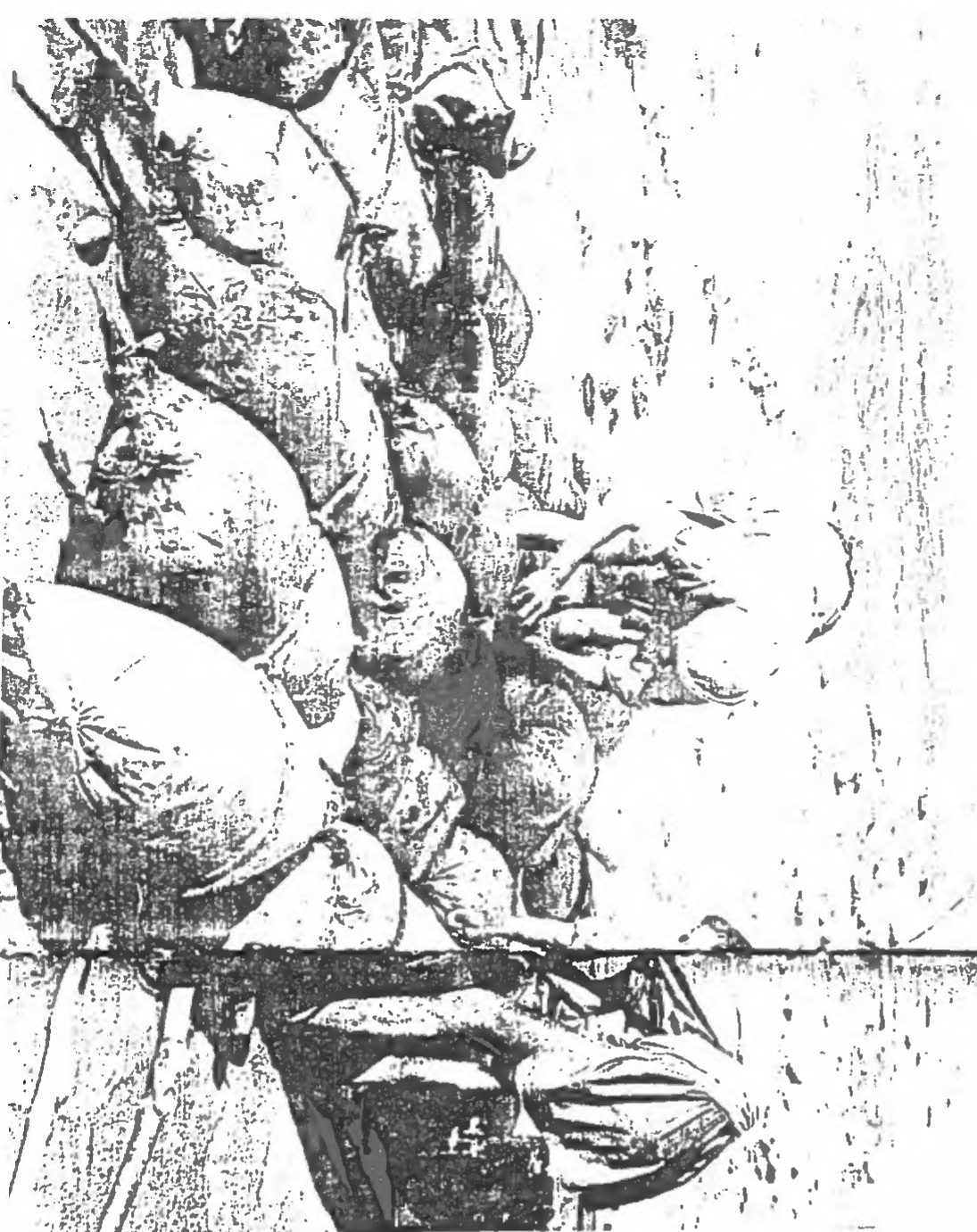
# People of Baltistan

Agriculture, herding, and dairy farming form the basis of

By

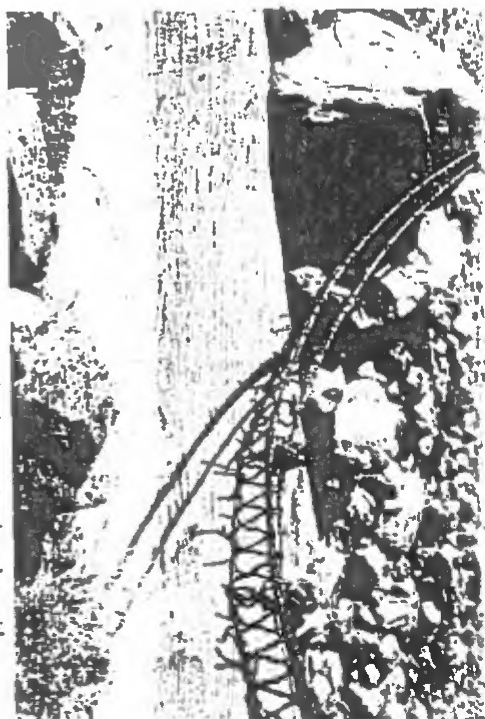
JAMES HURLEY

the Balti economy



An swiss of a skin roll are tightened and crisscrossed after trip down Shigar

Three in Baltistan. Normally used in calm water, the rafts can ride rapids.



Bone snare casts a shadow on Braldu River as Balti porters cross. Bridge is

**D**URING THE TWO CENTURIES that the British stayed in India, they penetrated into nearly every corner of the country and found out almost all there was to know about it. This was not only because of British administrative and security needs, but also because of a national penchant for adventure—combined, in many cases, with a taste for scholarly endeavor and interest in the culture. Thus was produced a wealth of factual and descriptive books that will long remain a monument to British rule in India. The “District Gazetteers,” in particular, are exemplary, for they relate in minute detail all that was known at the time about the people of a given district—their history, ethnology, language, folklore, and economy.

But for Baltistan, there were no “District Gazetteers,” since the country was both distant and under another administration, that of the Maharaja of Kashmir. The British did not extend their rule into north India until the middle of the nineteenth century, and for various reasons, including administrative expedience, they left Kashmir and its several frontier districts in the hands of a Hindu soldiery. Although British officials were stationed in Kashmir during the next hundred years, there were few of them, and they generally served as “advisers.” Their numbers grew, however, during times of military or political tension.

Because Kashmir occupied a strategic position at India’s juncture with China, Russia, and Tibet, and because

the maintenance of cordial relations with the ruling prince was important to the regime at Delhi, it was necessary to obtain permits to visit the area. This was only a formality in the case of Srinagar and the Kashmir Valley, but it took on real meaning as applied to such frontier areas as Baltistan and Ladakh. However, when it became known that the hunting was excellent and that prize deer heads were to be had in the faraway Karakoram, real hope disappeared in the face of attacks from that formidable breed known as “the British sportsman.” And so the region was “discovered.”

**I**N the latter nineteenth century, Sir Francis Younghusband’s daring trip from Peking across the Gobi Desert and into India over the Altnagh Pass excited world interest in the Karakoram. Soon after that, the great scientific and mountaineering expeditions began to arrive. The first, in 1892, was mainly British, led by Sir William Conway. The expedition penetrated to the Baltoro Glacier, one of the largest glaciers in the world outside of polar regions. The members mapped much of the tributary glacier system and climbed several peaks.

Between 1899 and 1912, Mrs. Fanny Bullock Workman, an American, and her husband, Dr. William Hunter Workman, conducted five expeditions to Baltistan and the Karakoram. Other major scientific and mountaineering expeditions in the early years of this century were those of the Duke of the Abruzzi (1907-08), and of an



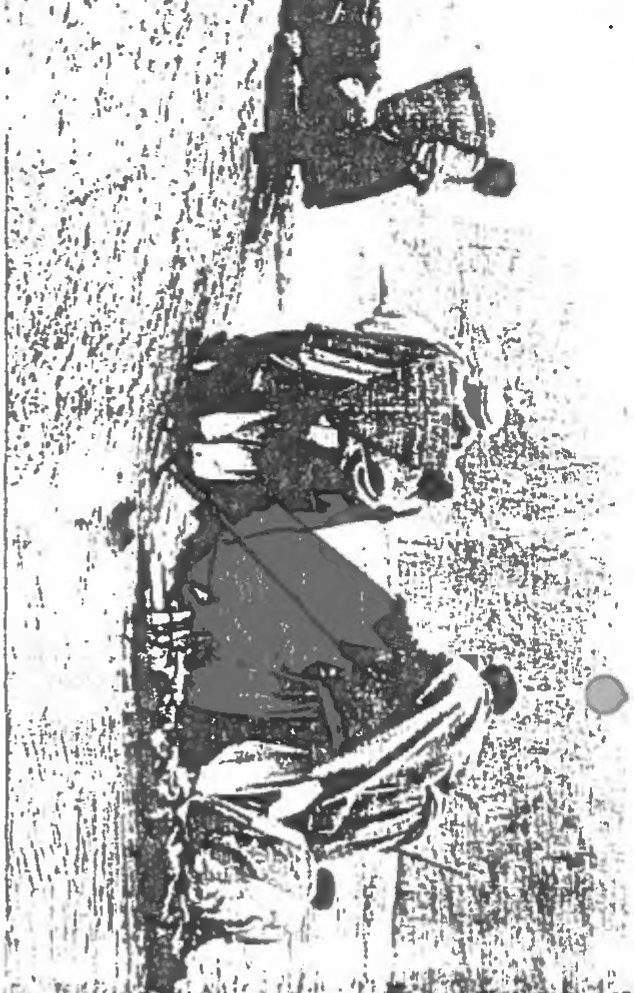
moments. Air placards may be utilized by business while the car is in motion.

collected by Dr. Filipino de Filipini in 1931-32. The territory covered by both expeditions overlapped the Karakoram (i.e., Buddhist and Chinese) Turkestan. In 1923-24, the Americans Katherine and Robert LeMay's barrell spent a year trekking and climbing in Badkshan and Ladakh. Since then, and particularly in the last ten years, the Karakorams have become

an international mountaineering playground. Each year from two to four expeditions contend for the honor of reaching the tops of perhaps a score of unclimbed peaks over 20,000 feet. Americans have had a good share in the conquests of some of them, including Hidden Peak and Masherupum, and have acquired themselves well on the 20,230-foot K-2, the second highest

BOATMEN prepare to ferry passengers across Shyok River at Kibapalu. Con-

These baskets on villagers' backs are made in accord with the size of user.



speaking. 'Ponjalis from Lahore, an occasional Kashmiri tie for the ropes to be made from a Balhi in from the mountain highland a backload of wheat, butter, or for seeds. The Balhi sells his goods for tea, and perhaps—if his wife been persuasive—a bit of bright for her. In the strange, oddly desolate Guljar speaking area, Pahari and Kherwari speak in a broken across the high Derasar route, and Kherwari this brought in caravans. A trip may take a heavy toll of their animals if they are caught in a snow-drift or one of the deadly cold winds which the plateau is noted. The cold and nature of these winds can be imagined from the occasional blizzard sweep into the Sharda Valley, usually accompanied by lowering black clouds, they shake houses and trees so violently and make such a noise that one begins to think the end of the world will be similar.

In numerous small tea shops one hears some of the dialects and long words that illustrate the different streams of humanity now comprising Skardu's population: Burushaki from Hunza, Shina from Gilgit, Khowar from Chitral, and sometimes Sindhi or Bengali.

This linguistic mélange has affected the local language, and pure Mohli is hardly spoken in Skardu any more. The local patois is such a mixture of Urdu, Balhi, Hindi, and Persian that the Balhi from other villages say it is hardly understandable. For training and administrative purposes, Urdu (one of the official languages of Pakistan) is the lingua franca.

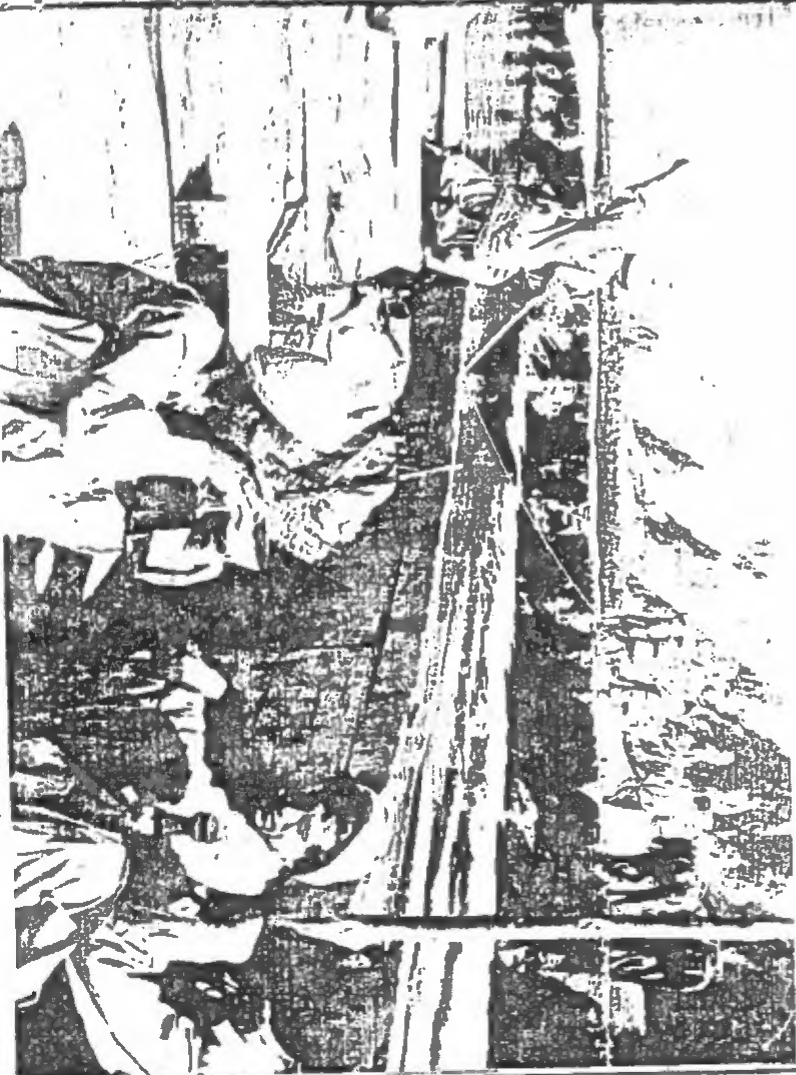
The populated part of Balistan which lies on the southern and western flanks of the Great Karakoram chain is made up of a number of valleys. The first of these valleys is that of the great Indus River, running northwest from its source in Tibet, and the rest

are those of tributary rivers, such as the Shyok and Shigar, and a number of *beas*, gathered streams—the Hushu, Thalle, Bradlu, and flasha. From at least the time of the Moslem conversion, local rulers have presided over seven of these valleys or valley sections: Skardu, Maphu, Shigar, Roudul, Kirta, Muzung, and Toti. From time to time, other principalities have risen but have usually been short-lived. As far back as is known, these local rulers—called variously *ryogpas*, *thans*, *sultans* and *raja*—have been fighting among themselves. Only in a few instances has a leader arisen influential enough to unite them all—Ali Sher Khano Anchan of Skardu and Ali Mir of Khaplu (and these two are possibly the same person) are the main ones. But generally the *raja* of Skardu has enjoyed a traditional position of pre-eminence, perhaps because Skardu has always been, as far as we know, Baltistan's trade center.

mountain in the world, after Everest. What is Baluchistan like and how does one reach it? These questions are asked even in Pakistan, for few Pakistanis have had the opportunity or perhaps desire to go there. The usual tendency is to confuse Baluchistan with Baluchistan, one of Pakistan's provinces to the southwest. Yet the area is within ninety minutes' flying time from Rawalpindi, Pakistan's capital. The plane ride (the alternative is a twenty-day mule track over the high and forbidding Poonai Plateau) is exciting enough to thrill the most sophisticated traveler. The plane skirts just above successively rising ranges and peaks, and skits the northwestern side of sprawling, snow- and ice-capped Nanga Parbat, called the "German-killer" for the twenty-six German pilots and paratroopers killed on it in the 1940's. Shortly before arriving at Sharada, the plane sweeps into the Indus Gorge; whose walls often seem to hem it in on three sides. Skimming close above one last, high butte, the plane lands on Sharada's baked mud field.

Sharada is the administrative and trading center of Baluchistan, and it is here that one finds the greatest diversity of races and tongues. In the heart of Pakistan, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistanis from Peshawar

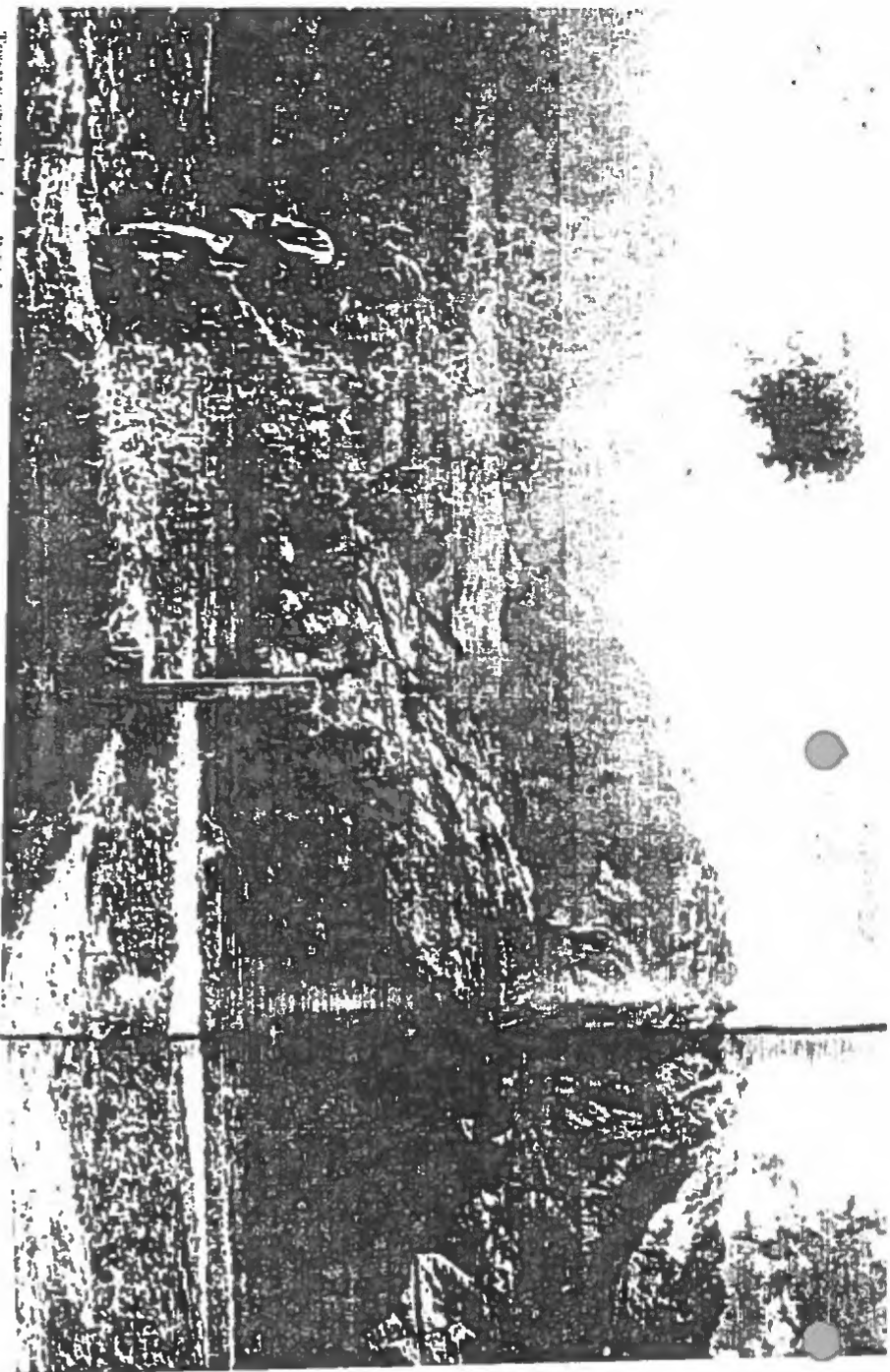
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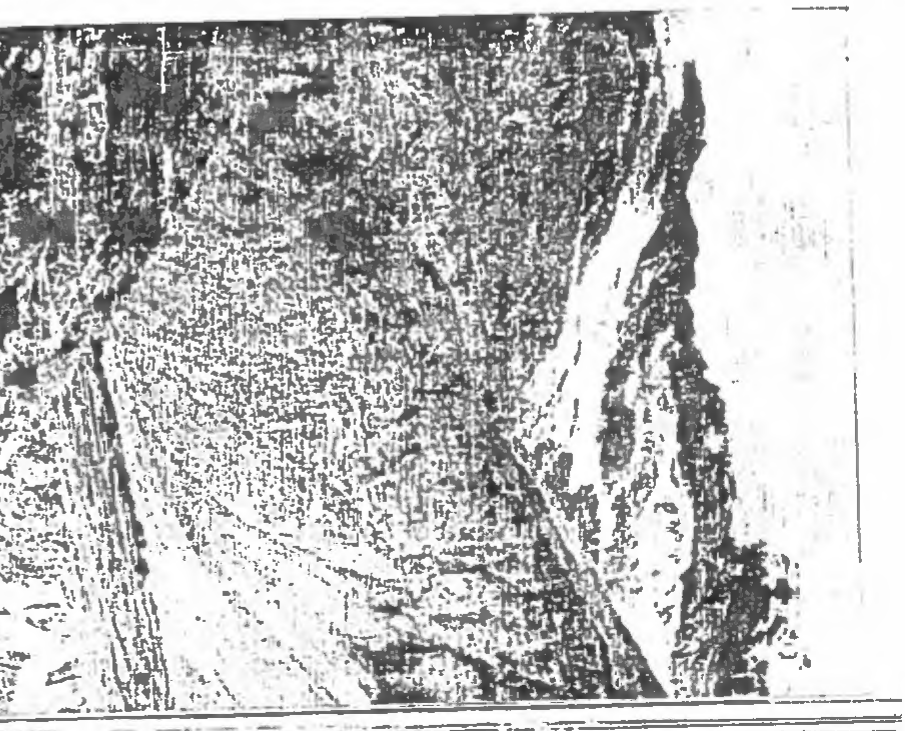
Firmly on foot is good! Superannuation by weekly travelers and policy by crew.

and help guide to the episode short-





These grains in air, a Hatt farmer separates chaff from the kernels of wheat as they fall into the stream.



Points in the air, a Hatt farmer separates chaff from the kernels of wheat as they fall into the stream.

ing on the season. In summer, when platters melt, it is virtually impossible to cross the raging torrents that are little more than gentle mountain streams at other times of the year. Various types of bridges have been constructed by the Hatt to overcome this. One of them is the rope bridge. Made of woven reeds, it is used mainly to span the larger rivers, in crossing the hills. Crossing one for the first time is an experience not soon forgotten. The trickiest part occurs in the middle of the bridge, where one must climb over or under a stick built up against the two handrails; the horse poses a dilemma since the height of the stick makes either move awkward.

In the valleys that have stable perennial streams, crude but sturdy wooden bridges on the sandstone pillars have been built at important crossings. They consist of one arch, whose sup-

porting timbers project over other timbers leaning from the bank. The shore ends are weighted with masonry. Where the valley widens and the freshet divides into small channels, local villagers merely bridge them with crudely hewn planks or logs. To my mind, crossing these is a harrowing experience, for some are twenty to twenty-five feet long and have a most unpleasant tendency to lurch up and down in motion with the illusion of sideways movement from bucking at the rushing water is unsettling.

Probably the most enjoyable mode of travel in Baluchistan is by zed (raft), a stick frame habited with two down or more inflated goatskins. Zeds are used

Baran means chairs near Kharan, in Baluchistan. Such as may be baran.



"A glance at the sun reminds Gulbi that *zan* must be ready soon. Calling over the roof to her neighbor, she asks for *mech* (fire). A little girl reaches through the thorns and hands her a few embers in a broken piece of earthenware. To this Gulbi adds bits of rotted wood for tinder and soon her hearth is ready. The large copper caldron, half-filled with water, boils soon, and she throws into it several handfuls of roasted barley flour, stirring until the mix thickens. Hesitantly she takes a chunk of dirty white butter and melts it, carefully picking out the goat hairs. The family cannot afford melted butter every day. Gulbi does not have to call the family—they are snugly there as she puts the steaming mass on a large metal plate on the

floor. The family attacks the fat-rich food vigorously. Tomorrow the main meal will consist of *zan* accompanied only by a sauce of green herbs.

ON the mountainside across the valley, since first light, younger villagers have been busy cutting and uprooting *burzee* (wild artemisia). This dry-looking plant, invisible at a distance, is both the food of the ibex and the only free fuel the villagers can stockpile against the coming winter. Occasionally an apricot tree may be cut down or a small amount of cow dung dried, but *burzee* is the main solution to the fuel problem.

On the way home, one of the young *burzee*goung (gatherers of *burzee*) sees an ibex and says he wishes he had a



EVENSING, Nizos operators at a polo match let gates stray from game.



Nizos watch at Sardin featured four of Mubian's seven roles as players.

The country's few horses are more for prestige and polo than for transport.